



WHY LEADERS SHOULD BE PLAYING GAMES

5 WAYS TO HARNESS GAMIFICATION TO CHANGE YOUR EMPLOYEES' BEHAVIOR

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Don't let the word put you off: gamification is a serious business. For a start, it is not about playing games but about using techniques developed by video game designers – the people who get players hooked on Angry Birds, Candy Crush and the like – to keep staff and customers engaged with your business.

And, done well, it can be extremely effective. Initial reports on the subject, which first caught people's attention 10 years ago, were overhyped but there is now a strong bed of independent academic research showing that gamification techniques can have a significant positive effect on people's level of engagement with particular activities.

There is also a growing collection of case studies demonstrating its real-life impact. Ford, for example, was one of the first firms to use gamification to support employee learning. It needed to increase employees' engagement with an online training program, which relied on people proactively looking at the content and driving their own learning. Through the use of gamification techniques employees' use of learning materials more than doubled. Or take the global telecommunications firm T-Mobile. In 2013, it gamified a collaboration tool used by customer service staff to share knowledge and identify solutions to customer requests. As a result, it saw a 96% increase in the use of the tool, which led to a 31% improvement in customer satisfaction scores.

How gamification works

Gamification works by creating reinforcers for behavior; for example, points systems, membership levels and progress markers. So when you "level up" through increasing tiers of membership in an airline frequent flyer scheme, that's gamification. And when you see a progress bar as you fill in your LinkedIn profile, that's also gamification.

First, it creates and uses *external* motivators: rewards and, sometimes, punishments, too. For example, a donation to charity for not reaching a goal, or a "black belt" for making it all the way through Six Sigma. Making these achievements public adds to the effect.

Second, gamification enhances what psychologists have identified as the three sources of inner commitment: autonomy, mastery, and connection. Autonomy is reinforced by helping people track their progress and see the impact of what they do; this gives them a sense of control. The desire for challenge and mastery is tapped into by setting goals, recognizing achievements, and creating a sense of competition. And connection is created by simply linking people who can encourage and support one another.

How to gamify almost anything

Some people think of gamification as involving little more than reward systems, points and badges. But for most situations and leaders, these will not feel relevant. So what are the lessons we can learn from Gamification about how to motivate and engage people that every leader should apply? The following five basic rules stand out:

1] Track progress

Showing people what they have accomplished so far reinforces self-belief, while letting them see how far they have to go appeals to their sense of mastery. It can also reinforce willpower by reminding them of the need for progress.

Tracking progress is of course a standard part of every manager's toolkit, but what we are talking about here is more than just annual reviews. It is the monitoring of specific behaviors on a far more regular level – for example, a weekly check on whether someone has achieved the reading goals they set out for themselves.

2] Mark achievements

This is, effectively, a reward for having done something, which contributes to self-belief and helps people feel good about their progress. These do not have to be financial or even tangible rewards: praise is free to give, and public recognition can be powerful.

3] Use challenge and competition

Setting targets is an easy way to tap into people's sense of competition, as is creating comparison points with others. This is not a motivator for everyone, but for many it will be. As a method, creating challenge and competition is almost always combined with both tracking progress and marking achievements. Progress needs to be tracked to show how well someone is doing, and then reinforced by marking once a challenge has been achieved.

4] Create social connection

Knowing that others are involved and watching helps people maintain their focus on what they are trying to achieve. Alongside this, most people prefer doing things with other people, which is why video games have become increasingly social. They encourage players to share their performance with their social networks and try to connect them to other people who have been struggling to overcome similar game challenges. Leaders can do the same at work by sharing people's progress.

5] Use narrative

The most popular video games today start with some sort of a story that tells players *why* they should play the game, whether it's to save puppies or protect the eggs of some bad-tempered birds. At work, placing a task within a simple narrative can have an equally powerful effect on people's inner motivation; doing their job may not save the world from dragons but they will still be happy to know how their actions will help with the big picture.

Shlomo Ben-Hur and Nik Kinley are authors of the new book [Changing Employee Behavior: A Practical Guide for Managers](#).

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